

Sadhu Sundar Singh - Revisited

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Last year when I visited some theological seminaries in India I realised how present the memory of Sadhu Sundar Singh still is. I found Sundar Singh vividly presented as expressing the Gospel in a truly Indian way in India and communicating the Word of God like he himself once said, “To hand the water of life in an Indian cup.”¹ This image of Sundar Singh is also reproduced in some of the contributions to an issue at the occasion of his assumed 100th birthday.² Also, he is considered as a person in whom the religious heritage of India is not rejected, in whom, on the contrary, the best of Sikhism, Hinduism and Christianity blend.³

Some may know that the last century in the twenties and thirties during a debate raged in Germany over the Sadhu questioning him.⁴ Usually you will find in an Indian publication only the hints that debate of followed by a statement ensuring the integrity and truthfulness of the Sadhu.⁵ The debate has admittedly been hurtful and a very western focusing on the events in Sadhu Sundar Singh’s life, more specifically on the records of his alleged travels into the forbidden Tibet.⁶ In the story of the German philosopher who could not believe even when he dwelled in the presence of angels and kept on “bumping his philosophical head” Sundar Singh tells us what he thought of those who question him.⁷

The debate on the Sadhu started because some had presented his piety and theology to Europe as the remedy for the crisis after the First World War. When I wrote my doctoral dissertation on Sadhu Sundar Singh in the eighties, my concern was to do a case study on Sundar Singh’s theology and evangelism which thus came to stand between the frontier lines of a debate on Christianity and culture, east and west, Indian and German.

When I visited Serampore College, I was honoured by a discussion on some of my insights into the Sadhu’s evangelism. This encouraged me to present in what follows in the two related points: the Sadhu’s missionary work and his attitude to other religions.

1. The story of the Sadhu’s life as evangelist

There is no need to tell the story of the Sadhu’s life here. I will, however, pick up at least some essential features of the presentation, which were traditionally given from his life, still today⁸, to make my point.

- His pious mother, Hindu scholars and other religious specialists educated the Sadhu.

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- He studied all religious scriptures available to him: Bhagavad Gita, diverse Sanskrit scriptures, the Sikhs' Granth, the Quran, and the Bible.
- When Sundar threatened to kill himself, Christ appeared to him and he was converted.
- He took on the robe of a sadhu and began his mission work in the realms of the forbidden Tibet where nobody dared to venture because of the fierce opposition of the Lamas.
- There he suffered for his Lord.
- He was a mystic and conversed with saints and angels.

The first interesting observation is that this presentation of his life has been stable almost over a century and that the elements chosen for presentation follow a rather strict canon. The story starts off with the accounts by Sundar Singh himself as early as 1912, the story was already published with the important parts as early as 1916 and some of the latest publications on him.

Friedrich Heiler, a German admirer of Sundar Singh, wrote and published extensively on him in Germany, did the second observation in 1924. He wrote that from the story of the Sadhu's life one gets the impression of listening to the story of an early Christian saint. What always struck me in studying the Sadhu's life and preaching was that he understood his life with the experience of all saints or Christians of all times. To him they all had the same experience in Christ! And that was exactly what he was hoping for others that they might find peace in God like he did. So the story of his life was a way to communicate and to preach the gospel.

Similar stories of other famous Christian converts were published in Sadhu's days and the mission societies used them in India and also in their home countries to motivate Christians to pray and to support missionary work overseas. In the case of Sundar Singh, he was the source and through his life, he preached a kind of narrative theology: by his experience and the miraculous incidents he had on which wandering and by telling it the gospel of Christ was preached and was meant to instigate new faith: to make the same experience of meeting Christ and taking up His cross.

2. Story and History

The debate on Sadhu Sundar Singh in Germany is not the most important point that should be taken into account. But the historical deliberations of this debate on the basis of thousands of pages of collected testimonies, letters and other materials resulted in the conclusion that the more spectacular events could not have happened how they have been told. There are convincing arguments that 1. The Sadhu is the foremost source of the spectacular stories he told, that 2. Especially the travels deep into "Forbidden Tibet" never happened and that 3. We cannot find hints the so-called Secret Sannyasi-Mission whose adherents Sundar Singh met.⁹

If we confront this result of historical investigations with the story of Sundar Singh's life, a fascinating gap opens up in the story of the Sadhu: his fame as a missionary rested to a large extent on the image of being a missionary to the "heathens" in Tibet. If one is willing to accept the results of the historical investigations then we have most of the accounts of meetings

with non-Christians – in the Sadhu’s wording - only by the Sadhu himself, and what is more, as an integral part of the story of his life told *to a Christian audience*. And a strong point of his stories always was that these “heathens” he met actually were secret followers of Christ who did not wish to mingle with the missionaries’ churches!

What we have independently from the Sadhu are the confirmed reports of “clouds of witnesses” of Christians who listened to him! They testified that listening to his sermons or hearing of his remarkable life had deepened their faith in Christ. I do not hesitate to include the editors and authors of most of the appraisive publications on the Sadhu here!

There is no doubt: Sundar Singh travelled widely and extensively through India and he must have had thousands of encounters, dialogues and probably some clashes with Christians, Hindus and Buddhists. And especially the aspect of speaking openly and friendly to believers of other faiths is part of his fame. But the gap I am speaking of is that we actually know very little of his debates, his preaching to people of other faiths but we know of how the Sadhu preached to Christians.¹⁰ And to go on: we do not know if his preaching like he presented it in his stories appealed to believers of others faiths like Hindus or Buddhists but we know a lot about how the preaching and telling of these encounters appealed to Christians!

3. The Sadhu’s Theology

If I follow this line of reasoning I find it striking to realise that in the Sadhu’s theological reflection; the dividing line is not the one between Christians and Non-Christians - in his own terminology - but the one between religious and non-religious people! For one of his own publications, used the subtitle “Being incidents taken from the lives of Christians and Non-Christians which illustrate the difference in lives lived with Christ and without Christ.”

I find in this title a matrix by which the Sadhu classified people:

	With Christ	Without Christ
Christians	True believers / the Sadhu himself 1	Nominal Christians 2
Non-Christians	Deeply influenced, some even without knowing it 3	“Heathens” 4

“With and Without Christ” is a collection of stories and incidents out of the lives of people the Sadhu heard or met during his travels. The stories in earlier publications or the incidents he spoke of in his sermons can be categorized according to this matrix. Regarding the category ‘Christians with Christ’ the Sadhu has told extensively about his experiences of how he himself persecuted Christians and swore Christ and how eventually he was converted by Christ and consequently suffered persecution himself.¹¹

In the earlier publication “Search for Reality”¹² the Sadhu reasoned that all men are religious by nature and this assumption also underlies the presentation of the stories in

“With and Without Christ.” Yet few men are serious about it and few of these, including most of the Christians, are “true Christians”! According to this matrix, one could define mission as to motivate a person to change from the category 2, 3 or 4 into category 1. To put it less functionally, the mission of the Sadhu is consequently not so much about converting believers of others faiths to Christianity but about helping people to realise their true inner nature: since all men stem from the same reality a truly religious person will ultimately become a Christian! By telling the story of his life Sadhu Sundar Singh made exactly the point that: He had been a devoted “Non-Christian” - like his mother - without Christ and ultimately became a “Christian with Christ”.

The Sadhu construed religion as a matter of evolution and this evolution has a clear direction: from the beginnings of the groping of mankind in the dark, driven by their spiritual needs men eventually came to the light of higher forms of religion like Hinduism or Buddhism. But Sundar Singh’s dealing with Hinduism and Buddhism shows¹³ that he deeply believed that the way of prayer and meditation ultimately will lead any believer to Christ: To Sundar Singh, reality is the source of all religion and Christ is the aim of all true religious persons. In the figure of “Christ, the fulfilment of (true) Hinduism” Sundar Singh did not distinguish between Christian faith and other forms of believing but between false and true perceptions of the one and same reality behind all religions. Whatever the reality behind the stories of the secret Sannyasi Christians may (have) be (en) - within Sundar Singh’s evangelism they illustrate exactly this point: the hidden truth of true Hinduism is Christ the sinless incarnation! “Once one pundit Sundar Singh once met and whom he mistook for a Hindu says: “We are preaching not about Krishna, but about Christ, the sinless, Incarnation promised in the Shastras, for Krishna did not come to save sinners, but to destroy them... but Christ came to save sinners.”¹⁴

In 1928, Sundar Singh told how he debated in his youth with the Hindu sadhu who was attempting to educate him in the knowledge of truth. The teaching sadhu told the young lad Sundar Singh that he was not advanced enough yet to fully understand the truth. And the devoted and pious young man told his teacher that: “I feel very hungry for spiritual bread. If you have not got it then please tell me where and how can I get it. If you do not know where I can get it, then say so.”¹⁵

I am convinced that Sundar Singh somehow doubted the received instructions. But even in the edited form where the student Sundar Singh outdoes his teacher by far it is, in the line of my earlier reasoning, evident that Sundar’s reasoning is not really convincing for the Hindu sadhu. The impatient and passionate reaction of the student to him is the best proof that the young Sundar Singh had not yet advanced enough and that it was only later that he was able to understand! So I doubt that this exchange affected the Hindu sadhu but for a Christian audience the story, on the contrary, is well formulated by Sundar Singh to encourage those who are already Christians about the true differences between Hinduism and the faith in Christ. The story very well explains that they have been right to leave Hinduism behind: In the Sadhu’s opinion, Hinduism does not satisfy the thirst for life and does not satisfy the hunger for spiritual bread and therefore the water of life will be handed in an Indian cup but not in a Hindu cup. Thus the argument underlying this debate between the Hindu sadhu and the (later) Christian sadhu is that to the Sadhu the Hindu may have been a devoted and religious person but he was wrong and did not see the truth whose name is Christ.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I think that in the categories of the pluralist debate of today, Sundar Singh was basically an inclusivist with a leaning to exclusivism. The inclusivism I have been discussing above, and the exclusivism one finds in the passages where he argues in “search for reality” against maya, the transmigration of the soul and against karma.

In these passages, he attempts to prove that Hinduism and Buddhism are intellectually wrong in their reasoning - but their followers may be truly religion seekers who will realise this when they trust more on experience of reality and less on reason. This to me is one of the reasons why he never saw any conflict between the way of a sadhu and his Christian faith. The robe of a sadhu was not just a manner of clothes or discipline, it is the adequate expression for a specific way of being in the world. In following the inner development of one’s own religious nature to a truly Christian, one becomes detached from the world and becomes foreigner to it and ultimately a homeless wanderer on earth. The model for this he found in Christ’s life on earth that did not have a place to put his head: He is the true sadhu to Sundar Singh.

NOTES

1. I refer, for instance, to the reprint of A.J. Appasamy, Sadhu Sundar Singh. A Biography to The Living Christ, Chennai 1990. In: Readings in Indian Christian Theology, Ed. By Sugirtharajah & Cecil Hargreaves, Delhi: ISPCK, Vol 1, 1993, where older literature is reprinted.
2. See the September issue of NCCR, Vol six 1989.
3. Augustine, P.A. S.J., “On Pilgrimage to Rampur”. A Tribute to a Pioneer, VJTR 65, March 2001, 212.
4. See Sharpe, Eric J., Sadhu Sundar Singh and His Critics: An Episode in the Meeting of East and West, in: Religion 6, 1976, 48-66. Perumalla Surya Prakash, The Preaching of Sadhu Sundar Singh. A homiletic Analysis of Independent Preaching and Personal Christianity, Bangalore 1991, 128-133.
5. I find it typical: “As with other celebrities in the public eye, controversies about SS were not lacking even in his own lifetime. Some people have questioned the veracity of some of the accounts of his journeys. To see the criticism in perspective, it needs to be said that SS was a wholly transparent person incapable of distorting or falsifying facts. These controversies cannot derogate from the merit of the outstanding Christian witness of his life.” Augustine: P.A. S.J., “On Pilgrimage to Rampur”. A Tribute to a Pioneer, VJTR 65, March 2001, 213. The last sentence is true but it is no answer. For a more diligent evaluation see Perumalla Surya Prakash, The Preaching of Sadhu Sundar Singh.
6. Like it has been represented for instance in Rebecca Parker, Sadhu Sundar Singh. Called of God, London 1918, and still is presented in the unchanged reprint Madras 1976.
7. Sadhu Sundar Singh, The Spiritual World [1926], Madras: CLS, 1983, 25-27.
8. See for instance Augustine, P.A. S.J., “On Pilgrimage to Rampur”. A Tribute to a Pioneer, VJTR 65, March 2001.
- 9.- See for instance the reports in “With and Eithout Christ”, 14-15, and 18-19.
10. See Perumalla Surya Prakash, The Preaching of Sadhu Sundar Singh, 148-293.
11. *Ibid.*, 50-65.
12. Sadhu Sundar Singh, The Search after Reality [1925], Madras: CLS, 1974, 1-11.
13. *Ibid.*, 12-30.
14. Sadhu Sundar Singh, With and without Christ, 18.
15. *Ibid.*, 52.